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Letter to the Editor

Female circumcision in non-Muslim females in Africa

Worldwide, female genital mutilation (FGM) is recognized as a violation of the human rights of women. The practice also violates a person's rights to health, security and physical integrity, the right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and, eventually, the right to life, when the procedure results in death. In addition, it is considered as a form of child abuse in girls and reflects deep-rooted inequality between the sexes, constituting an extreme form of discrimination against women.

According to World Health Organization (WHO) surveys, there are 3 million girls in Africa at risk of undergoing FGM every year [1].

In Egypt, Christians as well as Muslims practice female circumcision. Interestingly, the majority of the Egyptian Muslims are not aware that most Islamic countries do not practice female circumcision. Moreover, the religious authorities in Egypt do not speak with one voice on this subject. Tradition has been cited to be the motive of most Copts practicing FGM.

From the religious point of view, for the Jewish community there is no specific mention of female circumcision in the Torah. Some sources say that Jews practiced female circumcision a long time ago (e.g., Strabo 1937), but it was denounced by Rabbi Girshon. Currently, only one Jewish community, the Falashas in Ethiopia, practices FGM, but they consider it necessary for cultural reasons and not based on religious instructions. Many Jews object female circumcision, although they strongly agree to the practice of male circumcision.

Military as well as medical perspectives on (male) circumcision were influenced by echoes of 19th century Victorianism, seeping into the medical literature through the writings of Dr. P.C. Remondino, who wrote a book entitled "History of

Circumcision from the Earliest Times to the Present: Moral and Physical Reasons for its Performance". In the first edition published in 1892, Remondino stated that circumcision should be implemented to eradicate the widespread and dangerous occurrence of masturbation which could lead to all kinds of illnesses, including insanity [2].

Far from being dismissed for its perverse arguments, this point of view was unquestioned for about seven decades in the UK as well as in the USA. Half a century later (in the 1940s), articles began to appear challenging this point of view. One physician writing in "Medical Aspects of Human Sexuality" (1974) described Remondino's book, which had been reprinted without change in 1974, as "pertinent and carefully thought out" [3]. The rate of circumcision in Great Britain has since dropped to about one percent of newborn males, while in the United States it is estimated to be 59% [4].

The Jewish world was not immune to the Victorian mentality. Even though any hygienic function of circumcision is specifically denied in medieval and contemporary orthodox Jewish writings, Joseph Preuss claimed in his definitive work "Biblical-Talmudic Medicine" published in 1911 that ritual circumcision imparted health benefits. Dr. P.C. Remondino was listed as his sole reference substantiating this "fact" (p. 544) [5]. Some secular Jews as well as fundamentalist Christians still justify circumcision as a divinely inspired ritual of health care, even though, traditionally, Judaism has viewed circumcision as a spiritual rite [6].

As far as Christianity is concerned, Christian faith denounces FGM as a dreadful and inhuman act, since no reference to female circumcision can be found in Christian scripture, neither in the Torah nor in the New Testament. In other words, Christianity offers no religious basis for the practice either [7].

Christianity prohibits the excision of any part of one's own or any other person's body, male or female. There should be no interference with what God created.

Origen described physical circumcision as a shameful, even obscene practice, which made the body appear hideous and repulsive. Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria (d.444), also interpreted circumcision symbolically, criticizing Jews for taking biblical law literally. Mentioning Paul, he wrote: "the real meaning of circumcision reaches

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its fullness not in what the flesh feels, but in the will to do what God has prescribed" (cf. Romans, 2.28, 29) [7]. Cyril added to this religious argument another idea which has figured prominently in historical and contemporary debates: the perfection of human nature:

You consider...the circumcision of the flesh as something of importance and as the most suitable element of the cult...let us examine the use of circumcision and what favors the legislator [God] will bring us through it. Indeed, to inflict circumcision on the parts of the body which nature uses to beget, unless you have one of the most beautiful reasons to do so, is not without ridicule; furthermore, it amounts to blaming the art of the creator, as if he had overloaded the shape of the body with useless growths. However, if...we interpret what has been said in this way, does it not amount to judging that the divine intelligence is mistaken in what is fitting? Because if circumcision is the best way to shape physical nature, why was it not better and preferable from the beginning? Tell me then, if someone says that the infallible and intact nature is mistaken, does it not look like unreason? [7]

Several Coptic religious leaders say that baptism replaced circumcision for Christians. Maurice Assad, director of the Ecumenical Council of the Oriental Churches, said that God created men and women in the perfect form, and no one has the right to cut a part of his or her body. For Assad, female circumcision is forbidden because it consists of cutting a part of the sexual organ, while male circumcision is optional because it touches the sexual organ only superficially. Thus, he considered female circumcision as a mutilating act [8].

Nevertheless, we know that Christian missionaries in Africa were not strong enough to impose their views upon a tradition that was deeply rooted in the African values. Olayinka, for example, found that among 300 women selected at random in Sierra Leone 99.3% of Muslims, 88% of Protestants, 87.5% of Catholics and 100% of pagans were circumcised [9]. Comparable situations prevailed in Ethiopia, in Kenya, and in other African countries, tradition being stronger than religion. Similarly, female circumcision is practiced

by Copts as well as Muslims in Egypt. In 1965, Mahmoud Karim questioned 116 women about their motives to have FGM performed and the results were as follows: to comply with tradition (44), to decrease sexual desire (20), to keep the genital area clean (10), to give a good appearance (10). Thirty-two gave no apparent reason however, not a single woman included in this study cited religion as a motivating factor for her decision [10]. Three decades later in a survey carried out at Ain Shams Pediatric Clinic, Cairo, Egypt, roughly one third of the mothers claimed religion to be the reason for having FGM performed [11]. It is noteworthy that ten per cent of the responders mainly citing tradition as their motive were Copts.

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